

Hidden in the Quiver

Isaiah 49: 1-7

John 1: 29-42

I don't spend much time hiding anything. I do a pretty good job of putting things somewhere visible, obvious, and findable, only to discover that I've actually hidden the thing from my awareness. It's still out there, plain as day, just where I left it. But it managed to be hidden from my perception. By the time I've found it, I've uttered more than a few oaths, blamed my wife, my daughter, and the dog for good measure for somehow screwing up my life. I may even get around to throwing a few things before I discover that the only one from whom it was hidden was me.

Once upon a time, an old man was on his deathbed and his three sons surrounded him. He looked them over and knew they were the laziest parasites he'd ever known. He closed his eyes and shook his head. Maybe it was his own fault, but he'd soon be gone, and then they'd be on their own. He wanted to share some final wisdom with them, but really, why bother? They hadn't listened for all these years; it wouldn't be any different now.

He got an idea. He beckoned to his sons to come closer. He lifted his head slightly and said in a weak voice, "I have a treasure for each of you ... to share equally among yourselves." They clamored now, "Yes, Father, tell us about the treasure. Tell us!" His head fell back on the pillow. The old man said, "It's hidden ... it's hidden ... in the ... [choke] ... in the field." With a groan, he closed his eyes and died. The sons shouted, "Which field? Where?" But it was too late.

"Father had a dozen fields he worked," said the eldest. "Well, we better start digging then," they all realized. With amazing energy and determination, they dug up field after field, finding no treasure. When they realized that the fields were all dug up, they figured they may as well plant some seed which they did, and then harvested the fields with considerable profit.

The next season, they resumed the search for the treasure, digging up every single field. Still, no treasure. So they planted seed again. After a few years, the sons realized that their father's treasure **was** hidden in the field, only not in the way they'd imagined.

This notion of something special being hidden, but somewhat in plain sight, seems a curious strategy. The crafty old father tricked his sons into doing some actual work to fend for themselves. What is going on when something is hidden by God? This is particularly curious in this season of Epiphany when the Chosen One of God is supposed to be revealed.

In Isaiah 42, we have yet another of the "servant" passages as we've had in the last two weeks. Here we learn that the servant of the Lord is someone who knew he had been called to serve from the womb. He was called by God, destined for sacred service before his birth. In other words, God had had plans for this one from his inception. He had a mouth like a sharpened sword, yet was hidden in the shadow of God's hand. The

servant was like a polished arrow, yet hidden in the quiver. God has hidden away his servant, perhaps for some opportune time. Or has God hidden the servant as God's servant from the rest of us. But to what purpose? This hidden quality seems odd.

God says to him, *You are my servant ... in whom I will display my splendor*, in whom I will be glorified. This is surprising news to the servant. The guy is looking around to see if there is someone else that God could possibly be addressing. Surely it isn't him; his efforts had all been in vain and pointless as far as he was concerned. Despite his good gifts and his good intentions and his good service, he couldn't see where he'd made any difference. He couldn't point to any success.

The servant replies to God, *I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing*. He sounds pretty hopeless. He's trying to set the record straight. Perhaps God has missed his stunning lack of achievement? Has God confused him with someone else, perhaps?

Still, the servant makes his profession of faith. *Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God*. He affirms his commitment to serve the Lord his God, knowing that **his life gains meaning and purpose** in his service, regardless of the results. He admits that he is *honored in the sight of the Lord and my God has been my strength*. He would have it no other way, again regardless of the results.

Shockingly, God replies: *It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will **also** make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth*.

So, not only is the servant's dedicated service greatly appreciated and highly regarded, the servant gets – despite his self-conception and despite his lack of progress – a promotion to a new and even greater mission. The servant must wonder if this is a new invitation to ongoing **failure**. While he'll serve his God with the utmost energy and devoted faithfulness, is he being called to yet another fool's errand?

The hidden nature of the success of this servant's performance has been so well done that even the servant has no idea of any success. That's really hidden, even from the servant, and presumably from everyone else, too!

God continues, responding to this doubtful record of achievement, admitting that the servant – *despised and abhorred* – will bring kings to their feet and cause princes to bow down. The key lies in this: the servant's faithfulness will be met by God's faithfulness. He is selected precisely for his faithful service to his God, not counting the results, but standing firm in his trust and faith in God. This servant has shown an abiding faithfulness in *every* season, and he can be counted on to carry forward God's word and mission. If someone can make a difference in advancing God's mission, this is the guy. But only with eyes attuned to faithfulness will the hidden become visible.

Let's remember this as we check out Jesus walking around the community of John the Baptist following his baptism there *before* the beginning of his ministry.

In John, chapter 1, we find John the Baptist is praising Jesus every time he sees him. Frankly, the gushing is a bit excessive. The writer's effort to set Jesus as special and unique apart from John is poured on pretty thick here. John's gospel account has John the Baptist falling over himself to defer to Jesus as the Messiah, the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world, the one on whom the Spirit of God came to rest and remained, the Son of God. Okay, we get it – Jesus is the One!

The story goes on to describe two of John's disciples hearing John exclaiming about Jesus and choosing to follow Jesus ... literally, as in walking behind him. Jesus senses that he's being tailed and turns on them asking, "What do you want?" It's an interesting question. Not *whom do you seek?* Not *do you believe your teacher, John?* Not *what are doing following me? You're creepy.* His question (what do you want?) didn't get an answer. Maybe the disciples were a bit stunned and flustered by this. Maybe they really don't know what they want. They ask him in reply, *Where are you staying?* Okay, now it's really getting creepy.

They follow along and spend the rest of the day with Jesus. They wanted to see if Jesus was the real thing as John had said. Yes, their teacher John was highly respected, a prophet and servant of God, but John was a bit out-there on the wild side. For all they could tell, Jesus was just another of the newly baptized in John's community; nothing special. This quality of being the Chosen One of God, the Messiah, was not immediately apparent. He didn't have a nifty halo. He didn't shine. He didn't seem to be anything different from them.

Yet they were driven by a desire to see and to know. They didn't accept the face value presentation of Jesus, or trust in their own evaluation of him as an ordinary Joe, or, um, ordinary guy named Jesus. John's witness was compelling and urged them to continue probing to see if they could ascertain what may be hidden.

Consumed with questions and seeking signs of validation of John's vehement declarations, they came away convinced from their time spent with Jesus. They believed.

Andrew, one of the two who had followed Jesus, immediately went off to tell his brother Simon, *we have found the Messiah*, and brought Simon to Jesus. Jesus names him Cephas, or more familiarly Rocky.

We see disciples beginning to gather around Jesus, even before he leaves the John the Baptist community. (Truth be told, he's stealing John's disciples. A sheep stealer! Well, never mind that.) The curious disciples of John found in Jesus a unique level of wisdom and perspective, a rare depth of sacred understanding and spirituality. They came away convinced that, indeed, this *was* the Chosen One whom God had sent.

Further, this was the One whom they would follow. It was a major life commitment on the part of the disciples. Their faithful commitment was defined and expanded based on this encounter with the Chosen One who revealed the promise that his mission would change the world for the Kingdom of God. When the time came, they

would depart from the Baptizing community and follow Jesus. They saw his faith in God and they had faith in him. Their lives wouldn't be the same.

In the cases of both servants of God, there was a character of hiddenness that deflected common perceptions. Faithfulness comes front and center, yielding profound insights and outcomes for the individuals involved. For the servant in Isaiah and the disciples following Jesus, their faith commitments lead them into God's unique promise for them, into their calling and mission to serve the Kingdom.

In Epiphany, we come to see Jesus, realizing that here indeed is one who can only be recognized with eyes of faithfulness. Considered by the world, looked upon with common vision, we see all kinds of things in these servants that miss the whole point. Faithfulness can heal the myopia and distortions that a sinful world imposes on the servants of God. Yet the real value of our truly faithful service may remain as hidden from us and our understanding as it was from the servant in Second Isaiah.

Scripture beckons us to seek out with faithful eyes what God is doing in the world, and in our lives. When we can recognize what these hidden things are, we can be partnered with our Lord's ministry in new ways, called to new courses that lead us into God's promise. In faithfulness, we become servants, perhaps destined to labor in ways whose successes are unrecognizable by us or by the world. Yet they're known and visible to the One who calls us. And really, that's all that matters.